Honda Civic 1.5 VTEC Turbo Sport Plus – Road Test

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Honda's well-respected Civic line has been winning friends for decades.

Kim Henson test-drives a current model, in 1.5 litre VTEC turbocharged 'Sport Plus' guise...

(All words and photographs by Kim).

The overall competence of Honda's Civic models, in each of their generations, shines through when you talk to owners past and present, and, importantly, in conversations with sources in the motor trade; people who sell and work on the cars today. The genuine enthusiasm with which they all talk about the Civics (and indeed all Hondas), and especially with regard to reliability, as well as practicality and 'desirability', speaks volumes.

Today's five door Civic hatchback range starts with the SE, priced at £19,405, and rises

through progressively higher trim levels of SR (from £21,250), Sport Line (£22,750 upwards), EX (starting at £24,110), Sport (from £23,250), and Sport Plus (£26,115 upwards) to the range-topping Prestige (from £28,595).

For those in need of even higher performance levels there are two Civic Type R versions, including the range-topping GT variant. I shall be reviewing/test-driving a Type R in the coming weeks (please watch this space), so for now will concentrate on the 'regular' Civic range.

This impressive line-up, fully revised, lightened and re-engineered in 2017 for this 10th generation of Civic models, has to compete with offerings from the other major players in this crowded sector of the market, notable rivals (listed here purely in alphabetical order) including the Ford Focus, Hyundai i30, Kia Ceed, Peugeot 308, Renault Mégane, SEAT Leon, Skoda Octavia, Vauxhall Astra and Volkswagen Golf, among others. Potential buyers of a Civic might also be considering an Audi A3, BMW 1 Series or Mercedes-Benz A Class.

Petrol-powered Civic engine choices include a 129 PS 1.0 litre three cylinder unit, or a 182 PS 1.5 litre four cylinder motor, both of them turbocharged. For those preferring diesel power there is the 120 bhp 1.6 litre i-DTEC turbodiesel engine.

Transmission choices in the Civic line-up are between a six speed manual gearbox or 'nine speed' CVT automatic (but no automatic option is available with the diesel engine).

ON TEST



I have just spent a week test-driving a 1.5 litre, 182 PS VTEC Turbo Sport version, in this case fitted with the six speed manual gearbox.

This variant is especially comprehensively-equipped, and although I don't propose to fill this article with a list of 'everything' it has, it is worth mentioning some of the features…

Particularly important for all potential Civic buyers is 'Honda SENSING', standard-fit across the range and represented by a collection of safety systems and features employing camera and radar technology, among them Traffic Sign Recognition (in which a camera 'reads' road signs and transmits the information to the instrument panel), Collision Mitigation Braking System, Lane Departure Warning, Highbeam Support System, and Intelligent-Adaptive

Cruise Control (which enables the Civic to match the speed of the vehicle ahead). The traffic sign recognition and cruise control systems work together, helping the driver to reduce the risk of exceeding the speed limit…

Sport Plus and Prestige versions of the current Civics also incorporate Blind Spot Information and Cross Traffic Monitor systems.

In addition the Civic comes with a multitude of airbags, a raft of braking assistance aids and Agile Handling Assist, complementing the state-of-the-art engineering built into the chassis and running gear set-up.

All grades of Civic are well-endowed with comfort, convenience and security features, and our Sport Plus test car incorporated an Adaptive Damper system (front and rear), a sun roof, Smart Entry & Start, heated front seats, a wireless charging system and a high performance 11 speaker sound system. All these aspects are additional to the long list of standard features on the Sport version (and indeed all Civics are well-equipped).

Our test car featured a wealth of state of the art ‘connectivity’ functions too, including a wireless ‘charging plate’ for modern generation smart phones.

LOOKING GOOD



Whichever way you look at it, the current generation Civic (and, sadly, the last to be built at Swindon) is a striking looking motor car. During my time with the test car, almost all the car enthusiasts and potential buyers that I spoke to approved of the lines of the vehicle and its many unique styling details; a very few thought it looked ‘over-fussy’. Personally I like the design, seeing a fresh and clever blend of angles and colours in the frontal body panels and at the rear, with a visual highlight for me also being the integration of the twin pipe exhaust system into the centre section of the lower rear bodywork.



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As with other Civics the sloping but accommodating rear bodywork provides a generous 478 litres (16.88 cu.ft) of boot space, and has 60/40 split folding rear seats to give a wide range of passenger/load-carrying options. With the rear seats folded, available luggage space increases to 1,245 litres (43.97 cu.ft).

In this situation, my measurement of the load space showed a total available length from the backs of the front seats (set in roughly a ‘midway’ position of their fore/aft range), to the inside of the rear body sill, to be approximately 178 cm (70 in). My tape measure also showed the maximum available width of the boot to be about 127 cm (50 in), minimum width (between the wheel arches) approximately 89 cm (35 in).

The seat backs fold easily and quickly, opening up a very useful platform that is nearly (but not quite) flat and horizontal.

The boot's rear sill is reasonably low, aiding loading/unloading of luggage.

Unfortunately there is no spare wheel provided (never ideal, I feel), but a tyre inflation kit is housed in a shallow compartment beneath the main boot floor.

I especially liked the load cover for the luggage compartment, which pulls out from the right-hand side of the vehicle and stretches across the car towards the left-hand side. I found this easy and quick to use (and preferable to the usual arrangement of 'longitudinal' fore/aft mounting for such covers).

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Inside the car there is space for five adults to travel in reasonable comfort, with good leg room for all occupants, and generous head room for most front seat passengers. However, during my time with the car taller people travelling in the rear seats found that the car's sloping rear roof line restricted available height a little; it was just about adequate.

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Four wide-opening doors provide easy entry to and exit from the vehicle.



There are plenty of stowage spaces around the Civic's interior, including a substantial glovebox, a useful lidded 'multi-box' compartment at the rear of the centre console, deep bins in the doors (larger in the front doors), and, for rear seat occupants, elasticated pockets in the backrests of the front seats.

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There's a central armrest, incorporating cup holders, in the rear seat.

All the seats are mounted low down within the vehicle (which some less agile passengers might find a little challenging to deal with), but the seats proved to be well-shaped, supportive and comfortable, on both short and long drives.

I found that visibility from the driving seat was excellent to the front and sides of the car, not so impressive in terms of rearward vision. Admittedly the reversing camera (essential) worked very well. However, personally I found that the rear-window mounted spoiler, complete with rear window wiper, partly obscured and diminished the available view using the rear view mirror. In addition the substantial rearmost body side pillars, while stylistically helping the lines of the car from the outside (and, no doubt, structural integrity), proved to make life difficult when pulling out from a 'T' junction, especially at an angled intersection. In such situations I found that the metalwork obscured vision to the left and right.

The instrument panel ahead of the driver is clear and unmistakable, in daylight driving and at night, with excellent illumination. Particularly useful is the large digital central indicator showing the vehicle's speed; it can't be missed. The tachometer works unobtrusively yet easily visible in the background, and the central instrument unit is flanked by a temperature gauge on the left and fuel gauge on the right.



The facia incorporates a central touch screen, through which such functions as ‘information’, navigation, audio controls and many others are activated. It worked well enough, but, along with many of my writer colleagues, I still maintain that having to set or adjust such controls via a touch screen can be distracting for the driver. Thankfully on the Civic, there are separate rotary temperature controls for the heating system. These can be individually set for each front seat occupant, but are easily synched when required (so that both front seat occupants enjoy the same air temperature) at the touch of the left-hand button.

FUN

The current generation of Civics was re-engineered in terms of improving structural rigidity

and relative lightness, and designed to provide an enjoyable driving experience.

So while the car remains a practical family vehicle, it is also an engaging car to drive. At the outset I was impressed by the performance delivered so effortlessly by the 1.5 litre turbocharged petrol engine, and aided by a manual six speed gearbox, with a gearchange that stood out as one of the slickest-acting that I have experienced in a current vehicle.



I found that the engine was eager to pull strongly from around 1,400 rpm. In fact for manual transmission variants, the maximum torque of 240 Nm or 177 lb.ft is delivered all the way from 1,900 rpm to 5,000 rpm (for the record, maximum torque in the CVT model is 220 Nm or 162 lb.ft).

The result is a car that is as docile as a kitten when pottering around town, and with

minimal gearchanges required in traffic or when climbing hills, but this Civic comes to life in a delightful manner when the open road is reached.

The mechanical refinement of the vehicle means that the powertrain is quiet when accelerating and cruising at high speeds. At 70 mph in top (sixth) gear, the engine is spinning at a hushed 2,500 rpm or so.

By contrast, tyre noise was more intrusive than anticipated, especially when travelling on less than perfect tarmac surfaces.

That said, the car was a joy to drive on all roads, with bags of power and torque on offer, plenty of available grip, highly effective brakes and a steering set-up which felt positive and reassuring. I found that the power-assistance provided was spot-on; the weighting of the set-up is such that plenty of help was available at low speeds and when parking (for example) yet on fast main roads the steering still felt pin-sharp and responsive, even in adverse weather conditions.

If desired, the car's dynamic behaviour can be altered by pressing a button on the centre console to re-set driving parameters out of 'Econ' mode, and, by the touch of a separate button, changing the Adaptive Damper System to a more sporty setting. By so doing the vehicle becomes even more of a driver's car, with sharpened responses to inputs from the helm, but at the expense of fuel consumption and ride quality.

I found that for all normal use the 'Econ' and normal suspension settings were just fine, with a comfortable if slightly firm feel to the suspension. Even with these 'standard' settings engaged I felt that this Civic was a terrifically well-balanced car to drive on twisting open roads (for example).

The lights and screen wipers are also worthy of mention. During my time with the car I covered some distances at night and in pouring rain (often at the same time). The headlamp beams were effective and gave a broad spread of light on both dipped and main beam settings, inspiring confidence. The wipers too worked well, as did the powerful

screenwashers, even when in difficult conditions.

The parking brake… I am not a fan of electrically-activated parking brakes, but this Civic has one. It also incorporates an ‘interlock’ system that will not permit the parking brake to be disengaged unless the footbrake pedal is first depressed. This will take a little getting used to for drivers not used to such systems, but is a safety feature in that, of course, with the footbrake applied the vehicle should not move until the driver is ready to set off… (and the car will not roll away as soon as the parking brake is released). Operated by a separate switch, a parking brake ‘hold’ set-up is incorporated too.

FUEL CONSUMPTION?

The official ‘Combined’ fuel consumption figure for the manual transmission version of the Civic I tested is 48.7 mpg. Over a total test distance of just over 331 miles, which included some driving in urban conditions and for some distance against headwinds, the car showed an average consumption figure of 45.6 mpg, which I feel is representative of most normal use, and with which I was very pleased.



Interestingly, Honda's on-board computer system display can be set to show previous average fuel consumption figures (obtained between re-sets of the twin 'trip meter' mileage recorders), and it seems that the figures recorded previously on the test car I was driving, in the hands of other drivers had varied between a pretty consistent 43 mpg or so, up to a very impressive 47.2 mpg.

A helpful touch I liked was the 'capless' fuel filler arrangement, incorporating a small,

automatically-activated spring-loaded cover over the petrol filler pipe neck. With the external flap opened, the fuel pump nozzle can be inserted quickly and easily into the tank's filler neck, to refuel the car.

VERDICT

For me, Honda's impeccable engineering credentials and renowned attention to detail shine through. This Civic is a sophisticated, likeable, lively, sporty, comfortable and practical five door hatchback, bristling with useful safety and convenience features.

Personally I like the way that its styling sets it apart – in a good way – from all its rivals.

Its dynamic behaviour has to be experienced to be fully appreciated, but its torquey engine is eager to perform at all road speeds, the gearchange is especially slick and the car handles impressively, regardless of the road type and surface.

I found the car fun to drive, yet at the same time passengers also commented on its good comfort, seat-wise and in terms of ride quality.

So, with a few minor reservations as covered in my text, overall it's a big 'thumbs up' from me… I love it. Whereas some of today's cars are adequate but, frankly, bland, to me this Civic offers more in looks, character and performance. It's not ultra-fast nor a hot hatch in the manner of the Civic Type R (road test report on this model from me coming soon) but adds a touch of excitement as well as commendable practicality to everyday motoring.



WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC IN BRIEF:

Honda Civic 1.5 VTEC Sport Plus.

Engine: Four cylinder, 1.5 litre (1498cc), direct fuel injection turbocharged, with fuel-saving ‘stop/start’ system.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Power: 182 PS @ 5,500 rpm.

Max. Torque: 240 Nm (177 lb.ft) from 1,900 rpm.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 8.3 seconds.

Top speed: 137 mph.

Fuel consumption:

Official WLTP figure: Combined, 48.7 mpg.

Achieved during our Wheels-Alive test, over 331 miles, average 45.6 mpg.

Estimated mileage range on a full tank (46 litres or 10.12 Imperial gallons), at our actual achieved mpg: Approximately 460 miles.

CO2 Emissions: 133 g/km.

Warranty: Three years/90,000 miles.

Insurance Group: 15E.

Euro NCAP rating: 5*.

Dimensions:

Length 4,518 mm (14.82 ft), Width 1,799 mm (5.90 ft), Height 1,434 mm (4.70 ft).

Luggage capacity: 478 to 1,245 litres (16.88 to 43.97 cu.ft).

Five doors, five seats.

Basic Price ('On the Road'): £26,115. (Plus, on our test car, Metallic paint £525, and

other extras amounting to £1,795, making a total of £28,435).